

PrepNOW!™

A Foster Parent and a Mentor Find Friendship and Inspiration as They Team Up to Build College Pathways for Youth in Care

Renee Moss knew that foster care is traumatic for young people. What she didn't know – what shocked her – was how widespread the tragic outcomes are for youth who age out of care.

Renee was attending an introductory session at her foster care agency to learn about PrepNOW!, Fedcap's interactive curriculum for helping foster parents create college-going cultures in their homes. She has an adult daughter who recently returned to college and a 22-year-old son who is a senior at the University of Massachusetts. Renee chose to embrace PrepNOW! to ensure that the youth in her care – Tyquan, a senior in high school, and Abraham, a sophomore – have the same opportunities.



The numbers were startling, and Renee cried when she heard them. Since 1999, over 230,000 young people have transitioned from foster care without permanent family connections. More than one in five will become homeless after age 18. Only 58 percent will graduate high school by age 19. At age 24, only half are employed. One in four will be involved in the justice system within two years of aging out. In one study, seventy-one percent of young women became pregnant by 21.

Youth in care score lower on standardized tests, have higher absentee and tardy rates, and are more likely to drop out of school. Nearly half of all children in foster care have chronic medical problems. About half of children under five years old in foster care have developmental delays, and up to 80 percent of all children in foster care have serious emotional problems.

In addition to the emotional consequences, youth aging out of care face significant barriers to financial independence. A single 18-year-old who fails to complete high school earns \$260,000 less over a lifetime than a high school graduate. When they enter the job market studies show that their annual wages would be \$8,500 per year higher than if they had not dropped out.

College graduates fair better in every single test of economic self-sufficiency, earning nearly twice the salaries of peers with only high school diplomas.

Tragically, while 70 percent of young adults who are aging out of care say they want to attend college only 10 percent enroll, and fewer than 3 percent graduate.

"I had no idea that the percentage of our youth in care who attend college is so low, or what happens to so many of them," Renee said.

In the weeks following the session Renee began to rethink her role as a therapeutic foster parent, caring for young people with emotional and/or behavioral problems. One thing was clear; the path to college for Tyquan and Abraham would be much harder than it was for her own children. Renee made a commitment to gain a better understand the challenges they face and to help them in any way she could.

As part of that commitment she sought out and embraced the PrepNOW! curriculum. Unlike other programs that are delivered to youth, PrepNOW! is designed to enhance the motivation and capacity of foster parents and caregivers to prepare children for getting into college and graduating. The goal is to effect fundamental cultural change within the homes so that college is a priority for all youth in care.

The interactive, modular-based PrepNOW! curriculum posits the building of college pathways as a natural extension of foster parents' responsibilities for safety and permanency. It reflects a belief that well-being and self-sufficiency for youth after they age out of care are every bit as critical to successful life outcomes.

The orientation session had another profound impact on Renee's life; she was introduced to Success Mentor **Cynthia Coomb-Smith**, who would deliver the PrepNOW! modules to her in her home.

The two women have been meeting two or three times each month since then and have developed a strong bond. "Cynthia is an incredible mentor who inspires me in so many ways," Renee said.

A native New Yorker, Cynthia lived in Texas for 12 years and was principal of an elementary school in Beaumont, Texas when Hurricane Rita destroyed the school on September 24, 2005. Shaken, she moved back to New York, where she resumed a prior career in social services.



As a counselor with a Brooklyn-based nonprofit, Cynthia provided services for HIV and AIDS patients, and eventually became director of a program that counseled pregnant teenagers. Nearing retirement age, she spent three years as a volunteer working with victims of domestic violence. It was there that she first heard about ReServe, a Fedcap business that helps retired professionals in "encore" careers give back to their communities. These ReServe professionals - known as "ReServists" - serve in a variety of nonprofits, government agencies and community programs, including as PrepNOW! Success Mentors.

Cynthia knew she had found her calling. "So many of the children end up homeless or pregnant, and foster parents are not aware of the resources that can help them," she said. "I thought I could really help through this program."

PrepNOW! is structured within four modules – Values, Motivation, Skills and Knowledge – that are presented in small groups or individual settings. It includes interactive surveys to assist foster parents and youth in assessing their own thoughts and feelings about education and college; their values regarding education, and the factors that shape them. It provides tools for building critical skills for success like communications, resume writing and interviews. It includes interactive primers on FAFSA, SAT, writing college essays, successful college visits and academic advocacy. A motivational component includes testimonials from youth in care and strategies for staying motivated.

There is also a link to "The Step-by-Step Guide for Getting into College and Graduating," our 54-page booklet written by youth who were formerly in care and now serve on WFC's staff.

As a PrepNOW! Success Mentor Cynthia spends a lot of time visiting college campuses to gather information. She works with nine foster parents, and they were all amazed by the number of programs and scholarships that are available to them and the youth in their care.

In the spring of 2014 Cynthia spent so much time at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn that the school's helpful staff thought she was a student. As a result of her research she introduced Renee to the college's SEEK Program, which provides an array of support services to students from disadvantaged background, and scheduled an appointment for Renee to attend one of the school's summer sessions.

One day while Cynthia and Renee were engaged with the PrepNOW! Values module, which encourages parents to explore their family's educational background, Renee noted how few of her relatives had attended college. She told Cynthia that she had dropped out of high school to support her family and had not returned. That decision had limited her options in life, and she reflected back on it with pain and sadness as she contemplated the risks to her own children in care of not completing high school.

"I know what it is not to have that degree, and I know how far I was able to go without it, which was not very far," Renee said.

Cynthia knew right away what had to be done. She urged Renee to return to school to earn her GED. By taking care of herself, she knew that Renee could be a much better role model for her children.

"Sometimes Renee neglects her own needs, so I am there to motivate her," Cynthia said. "Once we started visiting colleges her whole attitude started to change about what she wanted for herself. The PrepNOW program is a great way to pass along those values to her youth in care."

Together the two women began to explore options. They found a nearby adult education program that offered week-end, morning and night classes. Renee enrolled at the school's learning center and was set to begin classes when she was offered another part-time job. Under financial pressure she couldn't turn it down.

The seed has been firmly planted, though. With Cynthia's support she knows she will earn her GED and hopefully a college degree.

"I am in my mid-50s and going back to school is scary," Renee said. "I am trying to balance everything, but working with Cynthia I know it will happen really soon."

PrepNOW! and Renee's own life changes are having an impact, providing the foundation for a college pathway Tyquan and Abraham. Tyquan plans to graduate in 2015 and is already looking forward to college. He has visited several City University of New York campuses. Strong in math and science, he hopes to study engineering.

Abraham, who Renee describes as very articulate and a good science student, faces some hurdles as he contemplates college. What is certain is that with Cynthia's support, he will be given every opportunity to succeed.

"He is at a fragile age," Renee said. "He has some behavior problems but he has a good grade point average, likes math and is willing to learn."

Among the other foster parents that Cynthia mentors, four of their children entered college in the fall of 2014. The work of PrepNOW! Success Mentors doesn't end there. The fifth PrepNOW! module includes strategies for helping youth cope with the challenges of freshman year, when so many youth in care are at risk of dropping out.

Renee greatly appreciates how the PrepNOW! Values Module helped her gain a better understanding of the mindset of youth as they prepare for college. It also motivated her in unexpected ways by forcing her to confront her own feelings about her own education. She has started to talk to her children about the traumas they experienced as a result of being placed in foster care.

Renee has become a strong advocate for PrepNOW! She leads two parenting groups at her foster care agency, explaining to the other parents how PrepNOW! has helped her as a role model and motivator, and brought a wonderful mentor/advocate into her family.

“I really believe that the majority of youth in care, with the support of their foster parents, have a very good chance of getting into college and graduating,” she said.

Cynthia is proud of all that Renee has accomplished and expects big things from her. “She has excellent communications skills, is very social and is a great motivator. She will make an excellent manager and supervisor one day.”

Success Mentors are encouraged to stay with parents for at least one year, but Cynthia wants to stick around for a lot longer than that. Her foster parent cohort feels the same, and its easy to see why; under Cynthia’s mentorship, at least three of them are talking about returning to college and graduating.

“I want to see it through and do whatever it takes to help them, and give them all the resources that are out there so they can succeed,” Cynthia said



Renee Moss and Cynthia Coomb-Smith